

# Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter

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Volume 38

Article 1

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1996

## Orts 38,1996

The George MacDonald Society

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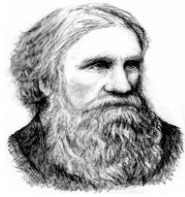
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### Recommended Citation

The George MacDonald Society (1996) "Orts 38,1996," *Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter*: Vol. 38, Article 1.  
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# Orts

## The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 38 January 1996

### 'FAV'RITE NATION': A PLAY OF VISION

Robin Brooks's play *Fav'rite Nation* which ran at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, London, from the 3rd to the 20th of January is about the relationships between George MacDonald, John Ruskin, Octavia Hill—and Mrs la Touche and her unfortunate daughter Rose. MacDonald tried to assist when Ruskin developed a hopeless passion for Rose—the story is told in the 1924 biography of MacDonald and later in William Raeper's. Octavia Hill's work for the National Trust and other good causes is even better known. One of our members comments that the play was competently acted and rivetting throughout, bringing out well the conflict of passions and idealistic visions in the protagonists. There was however no reference to F. D. Maurice who was a key figure in the actual events, but still remains very little known today to most readers and even students of the period. Also the character of MacDonald himself is not shown as developing during the action, remaining very much as he was about 1860.

There were spectacular sets based on Turner's paintings, and specially composed music, in a most interesting piece of contemporary theatre. With modifications, it would also make a good radio documentary.

### CONFERENCE ON 'THE VICTORIAN SUPERNATURAL'

Our Society was informed of a conference on the Victorian Supernatural Literature at the University of North London in November, unfortunately too late for us to make a contribution or even inform members in advance. It would have been appropriate to deal with *Lilith* on this occasion since *Lilith* is only second to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in English supernatural fiction. Of course MacDonald's Christian morality is a world away from *Dracula*.

A certain difficulty was presented by the fact that there were no abstracts of papers available beforehand and that the titles did not always make clear what to expect. A number of speakers made polite mention of MacDonald in passing but no contribution analysed any of his books. Nevertheless some 35% of the papers were very valuable in helping to provide an understanding of the literary milieu in which MacDonald worked.

Angela Wright gave a fine introduction to the splendid late stories of the supernatural by the Scottish writer Margaret Oliphant, showing how closely in some ways her long writing career paralleled MacDonald's.

Gina Wisker, in dealing with Le Fanu's Carmila in the course of a discussion of the Victorian treatment of vampires and the like made one think that MacDonald probably knew this work well.

Fiona McGregor discussing George Eliot's The Lifted Veil referred to some of the same authorities as Hal Broome mentions when discussing the way MacDonald introduces contemporary physiological/ psychological ideas into his stories. Likely parallels with Paul Faber in particular become apparent.

Gavin Budge gave a fine account of Polidori's short story 'The Vampire' which was highly illuminating for a student of MacDonald, as much from Polidori's approach to plot-structure as from his deeper insights. Polidori was a friend of Shelley and his wife, also of Byron.

Maureen Moran gave a very useful paper on Walter Pater's rather superficial approach to Neoplatonism—which reminds one of Lewis Carroll's when he was parodying the same thing in MacDonald.

Papers on Dickens and Beddoes also showed these authors working in the same area as MacDonald.

One came away with one's former purely intellectual assumption that MacDonald was concerned with many of the most profound spiritual beliefs of his time converted into a deeper conviction that this was indeed the case.

(These notes were contributed by John Docherty.)

### **OTHER SOCIETIES: AND 'SEVEN' MAGAZINE**

The Lewis Carroll and the Dorothy L. Sayers Society continue a very active existence in both cases, as evidenced in their bulletins. An interesting point from the Carroll news-letter 'The Bandersnatch' is the comment of a reviewer on an authoritative new Life of Lewis Carroll: 'It is distressing that (the author) Morton Cohen seems to care so little for Sylvie and Bruno, Dodgson's parable of love and forgiveness. It is here that he is closest to his friend George MacDonald.' Mentioning Carroll's theory of different visionary states, the reviewer implies that the fairy world of Sylvie and Bruno is allied in a way to that of Phantastes, and deserves more discussion than the new book provides.

The German Inklings Society produced a valuable and substantial yearbook including an account in English of the 'landmark' weekend on Lilith in Cologne last year. Roderick McGillis from Canada confirmed that this was a very important occasion illuminating one of MacDonald's most fascinating (and difficult) works.

Lilith is also limelighted in the new issue of 'Seven' magazine (U.S.A.) with three items: Giorgio Spina on 'A dark labyrinth towards the light', a Lilith study; Bordighera and the British, by Barbara Reynolds; and a selection of reviews of Lilith, 1895-6.

## MACPHERSON'S 'OSSIAN'

The Edinburgh University Press has published an edition of *The Poems of James Macpherson*, with related works; 1996 being 200 years after his death. Macpherson was once considered to have forged supposedly ancient Gaelic manuscripts, but his works are now thought to be based on genuine fragments of early poetry. They had enormous influence in England and abroad: Tannysen once borrow-ed 'a splendid copy' of Ossian from MacDonald's library. The new paperback will be most useful (£14.95).

## A WARNING

Members are warned that there are rewritten versions of MacDonald's children's stories in circulation which are quite well illustrated and come from reputable publishers. They are unbelievably banal, but might easily be mistaken for the real thing. They are in a different class altogether from the various abridged versions.

## APOLOGY

The editor apologises for a mistake in the last 'Orts' and hopes no one as actually misled by the announcement of a talk (on MacDonald's bibliography) which had actually taken place in the past.

## REQUESTS

1) MacDonald and Homeopathy. In spite of much research certain aspects of MacDonald's life and thought still need exploring, for instance his interest in homeopathy. Nancy Mellon is preparing a paper on the subject, and information is wanted as to how he heard of it, and about his acquaintance with Rutherford Russell to whom Adela Cathcart is dedicated. Existing biographies give very little information on the matter. Can anyone help us?  
2) Rare book wanted: 'Huntly as it was 70 years ago', by George Gray (Banff 1892), deserves a wider circulation today as it gives so much background for what many consider MacDonald's best novels. Can anyone give or lend us a copy, to produce what would be a most valuable reprint?

## NO COMMENTS?

It is regretted that no comments have been received on the 'draft leaflet' for new members which appeared in the last issue of 'Orts'. The opinions of members are of great importance, particularly those who have little or no personal contact with others in the society, and we would very much like to know any decided feelings about the document. Some copies of this 'Orts' are available on request if wanted.

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